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ABSTRACT

A college faculty workshop on developing a cross-disciplinary writing program is detailed in this paper. The goals of the workshop are defined as first helping content area teachers to learn to revise their syllabi, restructure their writing assignments, and teach content and disciplinary perspectives through writing, and then giving English teachers new perspectives on composition research and an opportunity to talk with their colleagues in other departments. A plan is discussed for developing the workshop that includes three major activities: (1) staging simulation for participants that will help them develop a sense of students' problems as beginners and guide them in addressing those problems, (2) holding collaborative work sessions in which participants design writing guidelines for student use, and (3) presenting a summarizing lecture on sequencing the writing process in a syllabus. (AEA)

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Developing a Learner's Perspective and a Critical Perspective in a Faculty Workshop

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Acknowledgments

The design for faculty workshops at the University of Texas at El Paso has developed in a network of institutional support for collaborative learning. The members of the B. A. degree review committee in the College of Liberal Arts provided the first inspiration for this project. The structure of the faculty development program at the University encouraged concreteness and direction as this project developed, and created opportunities for sharing ideas with colleagues. Tommy Boley, Robert M. Esch, Lawrence J. Johnson, Maureen Potts, and David Schwalm generated ideas, reviewed drafts, and listened and responded attentively. Through faculty development grants, I was also able to learn from scholar/consultants who were brought to campus: Maxine Hairston, James L. Kinneavy, Richard Lanham, Elaine P. Maimon, Nancy Sommers, and William Strong provided fresh perspectives on the process of writing and the development of writing programs.

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Developing a Learner's Perspective and a Critical Perspective in a Faculty Workshop

In the spring of 1980, near the end of my term as interim Director of Freshman English at the University of Texas at El Paso, I was asked to speak at a meeting of a curriculum review and planning committee in the College of Liberal Arts. This committee was considering a proposal that more writing should be required in subject-matter courses and that some interdisciplinary content should be included in the freshman composition sequence. The committee's proposal happened to mesh with some ideas that I had been developing through nine years of trial and error in my composition classes. Having grown weary of 500-word essays on hackneyed topics and ten-page research papers with no focus or methodology, I had considered the concept of linkages between composition classes and disciplinary survey course at the freshman level. My expectation was that papers written during a semester's study of the content and perspective of a discipline would have more substance and more methodical research than the ones I had been reading. My inclination towards such course linkages had been reinforced by the success of the upper-division technical writing course, in which papers are evaluated for content by professors in the students' major fields.

Also attending this meeting, however, were several members of the Freshman English Committee, whose presence served to remind me of territorial imperatives within the

academy. And as the discussion proceeded, evidence emerged of skepticism and territorial anxiety underneath the apparent agreement. I was skeptical about non-composition teachers' devoting sufficient time to writing instruction and about their ability to teach writing as a process; the powerful new rhetoric and its pedagogical methods developed in the past twenty years was just beginning to be reflected in the composition sequence in my own department. The members of the B. A. degree review committee were (correctly) skeptical about English composition teachers' ability to teach the processes of thought and the conventions of writing in other disciplines. Both sides, too, were suspicious of enchroachment upon enrollments and departmental credit-hour production.

Nevertheless, this committee meeting was an auspicious one. It provided compelling evidence of strong support for writing instruction in the University. At the same time, it helped define a problem: could both subject-matter teachers and composition teachers break through their skepticism and their departmental boundaries and find ways to teach each other? Fortunately, the University of Texas at El Paso has a well-established faculty development grants policy, with an application process that encourages clear definition of problems and the design of programs for their solution. The English Department faculty development grants proposal for 1980-1981 concentrated on bringing to campus consultants versed in the concept of Writing Across the Curriculum, including Dr. Elaine P. Maimon, who conducted a two-day workshop

in April, 1981. Moreover, the process of writing these in-house proposals suggested the development of faculty workshops conducted by UTEP faculty in future years.

Thus, when I applied to the NEH/Beaver College Summer Institute in Writing in the Humanities, a network of institutional support had already developed, both within and outside of the English Department. My specific task when I came here five weeks ago was to develop an agenda for faculty workshops, to be conducted by UTEP personnel, to explore theory and methods for implementing a cross-disciplinary writing program. I am much less skeptical about the possibilities for such a program than I was a year and a half ago. Now that I've taken an in-depth motorcycle tour of the New Rhetoric and of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, I am convinced that the basic principles are clear and teachable. I believe that teachers in other disciplines than English can learn to revise their syllabi, to restructure their writing assignments, and to teach content and disciplinary perspectives through writing. I also believe that teachers in the Department of English can profit from new perspectives, both from new research in composition and from dialogue with colleagues in other departments. In the content courses of the English major, insights from rhetoric can improve the teaching of writing about literature;[1] in the composition courses, attentiveness to the dialectics and styles of other disciplines can rescue English faculty and their students from narrowly belletristic

evaluations and prescriptive dicta.

So much for the visionary. I must now descend to practical considerations: how, in the fall of this year, are faculty in the College of Liberal Arts going to learn about teaching the process of writing in a two-day conference? Furthermore, how are we to avoid raising the territorial hackles mentioned above? Briefly, the workshops will be structured to initiate two key changes of attitude. If these changes are successfully initiated, faculty will participate increasingly in Writing Across the Curriculum activities, and the continuing need to collaborate across disciplinary lines should mitigate territorialism. I will summarize these two key changes of attitude in the phrases "a learner's perspective" and "a critical perspective." By learner's perspective, I mean a sense of our students' inexperience with complex operations of thinking and composing, and of their consequent intimidation by concepts and strategies that scholars have long ago internalized. The learner's perspective will be developed by inductive exercises, accompanied by explicit directions, which, ideally, will give the faculty participant an approximate sense of what it is like to be a student. In simple terms, the learner's perspective involves recognizing the problem of being puzzled. Successful learners--which I assume university faculty to be--also develop a habit of applying analytic thought to problems, or a critical perspective. At the UTEP faculty conference, the critical perspective will denote conscious attention to

and evaluation of what we tell students in our syllabi, assignments, and classroom procedures.

In the remainder of today's presentation, I will illustrate the development of the learner's perspective and of its corollary, the critical perspective, by referring to the format of the first of two conferences planned for the fall semester.[2] In this conference, three activities in particular will first simulate for participants a sense of students' problems as beginners and then turn participants' intelligent thought towards addressing those problems: the journal or writing log; collaborative learning techniques; and a summarizing lecture on sequencing the writing process in the syllabus.

The journal, a non-graded notebook of private writing, is an assignment made with increasing frequency in composition classes. The pedagogical value of private writing is well-established in current rhetorical and educational theory. James L. Kinneavy places the journal in the category of expressive writing, whose primary focus is the "reaction of the self."[3] James Britton uses the same term, expressive, to refer to a necessary stage in the development of ideas prior to the point that the writer is ready to expose discourse for public evaluation.[4] James Moffett's description of the learning process, which draws heavily on the work of Piaget, provides further justification for the use of private writing: "Real learning is not accepting statements . . . but constantly

reorganizing one's own inner field in an effort to match it with the field of study."[5] All three of these authorities suggest that private writing is a necessary stage in assimilating complex ideas.

Despite the pedagogical and theoretical justification for the terms journal and expressive writing, however, we will not emphasize this nomenclature in the University of Texas at El Paso conference. Unfortunately, as Richard Young points out, Romantic "vitalist assumptions" have too often been associated with the composing process;[6] it may be all too easy for faculty accustomed to think of writing ability as a "knack" that cannot really be taught to view the journal of private observations as confirmation that learning to write can take place without instruction. Moreover, for some members of the faculty, the terms journal and expressive may connote negative images from the 1960's of irresponsible relevance and popular mysticism. Accordingly, every effort will be made to present private writing as a rational, controllable, conscious process. The term "writing log" will be used, and its purpose as "thinking space" in which students use writing as a mode of learning will be stressed.[7]

In a packet of informative materials that participants will receive about two weeks before the conference, they will be asked to bring a notebook, to be kept separate from note-taking materials, to be used as a writing log for the development of ideas. In each workshop session, participants will be asked to focus their thoughts from time to time

by writing for three to five minutes in their writing logs.[8] Participants will also receive in their informative packets copies of three scholarly articles--Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning"[9]; Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes, "Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process"[10]; and Elaine P. Maimon, "Talking to Strangers"[11]--with the request to read them and to bring them to the conference. In the evening session of the first day of the conference, the simulation of classroom use of the private writing log will become a near-approximation during the discussion of the articles by Emig and Flower and Hayes. These two articles provide an important theoretical framework for both the New Rhetoric and Writing Across the Curriculum, expressed in terminology and style that are technical, challenging, and to some extent peculiar to the discipline of rhetoric. As participants assimilate the information from these articles into their own inner field and in their own language, they will experience both some of the puzzlement before new concepts that their students encounter and some of the power of writing as a way of learning, of coming to terms with new concepts. In other words, they will directly experience a learner's perspective. In the summary discussion of these articles near the end of the evening session, participants will be asked to consider critically their experiences with private writing throughout the day and to discuss how such ungraded logs could be incorporated in their classes. In other words, their critical perspective will be focused

on classroom applications.

While writing log activities will continue during the second day of the conference, emphasis will shift to another approach to the teaching of writing, the collaborative learning techniques developed by Kenneth A. Bruffee. Bruffee claims that "students can sometimes learn more from each other than they learn directly from the teacher, provided the teacher has created an atmosphere in which this kind of learning can occur, and has arranged the work so that it is compatible with self-help and mutual aid."[12] Bruffee's "provided" clause contains an implicit warning about the time, planning, and care needed to use collaborative techniques in the classroom, and participants will be duly cautioned that they are simulating one possible direction that the writing program at UTEP could take. Nevertheless, faculty members are familiar with collaborative procedures from committee work with its concommitant skull sessions, so that creating the atmosphere for this type of activity at the faculty conference will require only brief background information.

The collaborative group work session on the morning of the second day of the conference will combine learner's perspective and critical perspective as participants consider what students need to know about writing assignments. Groundwork for this session will be laid in the first and second sessions of the first day of the conference. The topics of these initial discussions have been worded to direct participants' attention not only to students' writing (their

products) but also to student writers (their inexperience as learners, their misconceptions about the process of writing). Towards the end of the second session of the first day, during discussion of actual representative student papers at UTEP, participants will be asked to consider how students may have failed to understand the terms of certain assignments, or how they may have failed to develop successful strategies for carrying out the operations called for. Inevitably, this discussion should lead to a key question, ideally to be phrased by the participants themselves: "Could the student be give some directions, or further directions, about essential operations in the assignment?" After an open discussion of considerations in making assignments, participants will be asked to incubate overnight on the following task: "What are the five most important things a student needs to know about a writing assignment? Bring a jotted list to the morning session."

At the first session the next morning, participants will work in groups of five to achieve a consensus list. Each group will appoint a recorder, who will make a report in a plenary session, during which participants in the conference will generate a list of criteria for giving writing assignments. The list thus generated will be part of the follow-up activities to the conference; after the conference, it will be distributed in draft form to participants, edited, and eventually published in an appropriate faculty forum. At the conference itself, participants will be invited

to consider ways the collaborative learning technique could be employed in their classes--for example, having students work in groups to develop questions about a particular writing assignment. Thus, the collaborative group work session will illustrate a classroom procedure and focus attention on the central theme of the conference: the student as apprentice, to whom the intricate mysteries of academic disciplines must be made explicit.

At a two-day conference, not every component of the New Rhetoric as it relates to Writing Across the Curriculum can be directly simulated. I have made choices of what to emphasize and what to summarize based on my knowledge of the dynamics of my own institution, a large public university where some 50% of entering freshmen enroll in some form of remedial composition. Since the lack of control over the conventions of Edited American English typical of remedial or basic writers has not been personally experienced by most university faculty members, the problems of such writers will be dealt with in lecture and demonstration.

The summary lecture at mid-morning of the second day of the conference will offer participants some suggestions for managing extended writing assignments such as term papers or essays. A brief survey of the article by Elaine P. Maimon, "Talking to Strangers," and reference to themes established in earlier discussions and collaborative sessions will provide

an initial context. The lecture will then turn to the specific difficulties of the basic writer and will develop the apparent paradox that departures from the conventions of the written code (errors) may be most profitably be dealt with by the teacher's paying less attention to them, at least during draft stages, until the writer has something worth saying and worth polishing. Of course, basic writers frequently need attention to matters of vocabulary and syntax by which things worth saying are said within a particular discipline. This point will not be ignored during the lecture, and some suggestions about how to conduct such instruction efficiently will be made. Nevertheless, the lecture will emphasize the research mentioned in Maimon's article, particularly the studies by John R. Hayes at Carnegie-Mellon University, which indicate that "for most writers the tendency to edit takes precedence over all other writing activities."[13] Dr. Hayes, during his visit to this Institute, graciously agreed to send me a copy of one research protocol, a transcription of a student writer's thinking aloud as he composes, which shows dramatically how overconcern for spelling and punctuation at the stage of generating written discourse causes an overload of short-term memory and effectively blocks writing. This transcription should give conference participants a vivid example of the "sense of desperation"[14] which paralyzes many student writers. Following presentation of this protocol, participants may be receptive to a few suggestions for helping these basic writers, such as allowing students brief class periods to use dictionaries

and handbooks for reference in proofreading, modelling use of the reference handbook in conference hours, and training undergraduate peer tutors in the Writing Laboratory to help students with problems of vocabulary and syntax, including those that are discipline-specific.

The late Mina P. Shaughnessy, in a memorable address, spoke of four stages in the development of faculty attitudes toward the course variously labelled as "Basic Writing, alias remedial, developmental, pre-baccalaureate, or even handicapped English."[15] Observers of the academy will readily relate her four stages to their own experience: GUARDING THE TOWER, CONVERTING THE NATIVES, SOUNDING THE DEPTHS, and DIVING IN. At a university where, as I have described, some 50% of entering freshmen are regularly placed in the basic or developmental writing course, these stages inevitably also describe faculty attitudes towards Writing Across the Curriculum. The conferences scheduled for fall 1981 are designed to encourage a significant part of the faculty in the College of Liberal Arts to sound the depths, to leave behind self-defeating ideation such as "these students shouldn't even be here" or "why can't they learn such simple things" and to consider thoughtfully how procedures of conceptualization and composition that seem readily accessible to scholars can be formidably unclear to students. The learner's perspective and the critical perspective developed in these conferences will be plumb lines for sounding these depths. While it would be wildly over-optimistic

to expect all participants to dive into Writing Across the Curriculum after the conferences, the follow-up activities may help more than a few to test the water and eventually to push off from the dock.

Notes

[1]In A Theory of Discourse (1971; rpt. New York: Norton, 1980), James L. Kinneavy chronicles and deplores the fragmenting of discourse theory into different academic departments during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (See esp. pp. 11-17.) In a lecture at the Beaver College/ NEH Institute on Writing in the Humanities, July, 1981, Kinneavy suggested that reintegrating rhetoric into the English department, and into the core curriculum, would help make liberal learning more directly relevant to our students' lives.

[2]The general outline of these workshops was suggested by Toby Fulwiler and Robert Jones, "Faculty Workshops in Writing," Freshman English News 8.2 (1979), 3-4.

[3]Kinneavy, p. 60.

[4]James Britton, "The Composing Processes and the Functions of Writing," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), pp. 16 and 23-26.

[5]James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 149.

[6]Richard Young, "Invention: A Topographical Survey," in Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 20-21.

[7]David Hamilton, in "Interdisciplinary Writing," College English 41 (1980), 780-796, favors the term "writing log," citing the astronomer James Van Allen, who points out that "a log is an essential tool of a scientist" (p. 788). Gerald L. Belcher, staff member of the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute in Writing in the Humanities held at Beaver College, July, 1981, suggested the term "thinking space" in reference to the journal.

[8]The techniques for using the writing log follow the suggestions of Fulwiler and Jones. Specific procedures were also suggested by Gerald L. Belcher.

[9]College Composition and Communication 28 (1977), 122-128.

[10]College English 39 (1977), 449-461.

[11]College Composition and Communication 31 (1979), 364-369.

[12]Kenneth A. Bruffee, A Short Course in Writing, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1980), p. 192.

[13]Maimon, p. 365.

[14]Maimon, p. 365.

[15]Mina P. Shaughnessy, "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," rpt. in Composition and Its Teaching, ed. Richard C. Gebhardt (Ohio Council of Teachers of Language Arts, 1979), p. 15.

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